Developing a tool to assess language vitality

3rd International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation
28 February – 3 March 2013

Michael Ewing University of Melbourne

Margaret Florey Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity

Romola Rassool University of Kelaniya

Motivation

To develop a standardised assessment tool that

- provides an informed overview of linguistic vitality
- balances global applicability with local appropriateness
- permits
  - rigorous comparisons between sites
  - evaluation of intergenerational transmission of linguistic and other Indigenous knowledge
  - analysis of how linguistic ability varies according to sociolinguistic factors such as age / generation, gender, religious affiliation, special roles

Frameworks for assessing language status

- **Fishman 1991** *Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale* (GIDS) — 1 (safe) - 8 (extinct) point scale that focuses on the key role of intergenerational transmission in the maintenance of a language
- **Lewis and Simons 2010** *Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale* (EGIDS) — 13 levels on 0 (international) -10 (extinct) scale with some (a) and (b): e.g. 8a moribund 8b nearly extinct

Frameworks for assessing language status

- **UNESCO 2003** — 9 indicators of language vitality on a 0 (extinct) -5 (safe) 6-point scale:
  - Linguistic vitality and state of endangerment (6 indicators)
  - Language attitudes (2 indicators)
  - Amount and quality of documentation
- **McConvell 2005** *National Indigenous Languages Survey* (NILS) Report 2005— 4 language endangerment indicators
  - Intergenerational language transmission
  - Number of speakers
  - Proportion of speakers
  - Domains and functions of use

Existing frameworks

- Widely used internationally
- Provide broad-picture indications of vitality across regions / countries / language families
- Useful for reports, policy-makers, raising awareness

Methodological drawbacks

- relies on observation and self-report rather than empirical evidence
- Not standardised in method or terminology (for viability, speaker fluency, etc.)
- Therefore comparisons between sites and situations are difficult

Language Vitality Test

- Development of a protocol consisting of three tasks that test receptive, productive and creative abilities
- Timeline
  - 1990's – protocol first developed to compare linguistic vitality in three Alune language sites in Eastern Indonesia
  - 2000's – used in four language communities in Central Maluku. Results primarily analysed for receptive ability
  - In 2012 – adapted for use with the Sri Lankan Malay community. Method developed for analysing and quantifying productive ability

Task 1: Lexical recognition

- Designed to test **receptive ability**
- Participants shown five sets of around 10 photos each with images ranging from common objects to people and activities

Task 1: Lexical recognition









Task 1: Lexical recognition

- Designed to test **receptive ability**
- Participants shown five sets of around 10 photos each with images ranging from common objects to people and activities
- Tester talks about the images to make sure the content is clear to the participant
- Hear recording in the TL with short descriptions and they choose the picture being described

Task 1: Lexical recognition

- Desig
- Partic d 10 photo m comm ties
- Teste e sure the co t
- Hear ns and they c bed

Task 1: Lexical recognition

- No productive language skills necessary
- Can include all members of the community
- Aims to be low stress for participants
  - test is not timed
  - participants can stop at any point
- Scored quickly on a right-wrong basis

Task 1: Lexical recognition

- An efficient way to get a global picture of language proficiency
- Ascertain whether generational transmission failure – that is, linguistic tip (Dorian 1981) – is taking place
- Compare broad differences in linguistic vitality between language communities

Task 2: Translation

- Designed to test **productive ability**
- Only participants who have scored well on Lexical Recognition move on to translation (e.g. 66% correct)
- Consists of progressively more complex sentences recorded in the language of wider communication

Task 2: Translation

- Participants listen to recording and translate orally into the target language
- Participants can stop at any time (or administrator can end the test at any time)
- Scoring is more complicated
  - must be done separately
  - requires listening to recorded test, transcription and analysis

Task 2: Translation

- Identify finer-grained differences within and between communities
- Determine speaker groups according to shared linguistic features, e.g.
  - word order
  - loanwords
  - innovative grammar
- Identify conservative and emerging varieties

Task 3: Extended discourse

- Designed to test **creative ability**
- Only respondents who are at ease with Task 2 move on to Task 3
- Respondents are asked to produce extended, spontaneous language

Task 3: Extended discourse

- Prompts may include:

Photos selected from the lexical recognition task displayed as triggers. Respondent is asked to talk in the TL for a short while about the scene, or to make up a story.

Task 3: Extended discourse

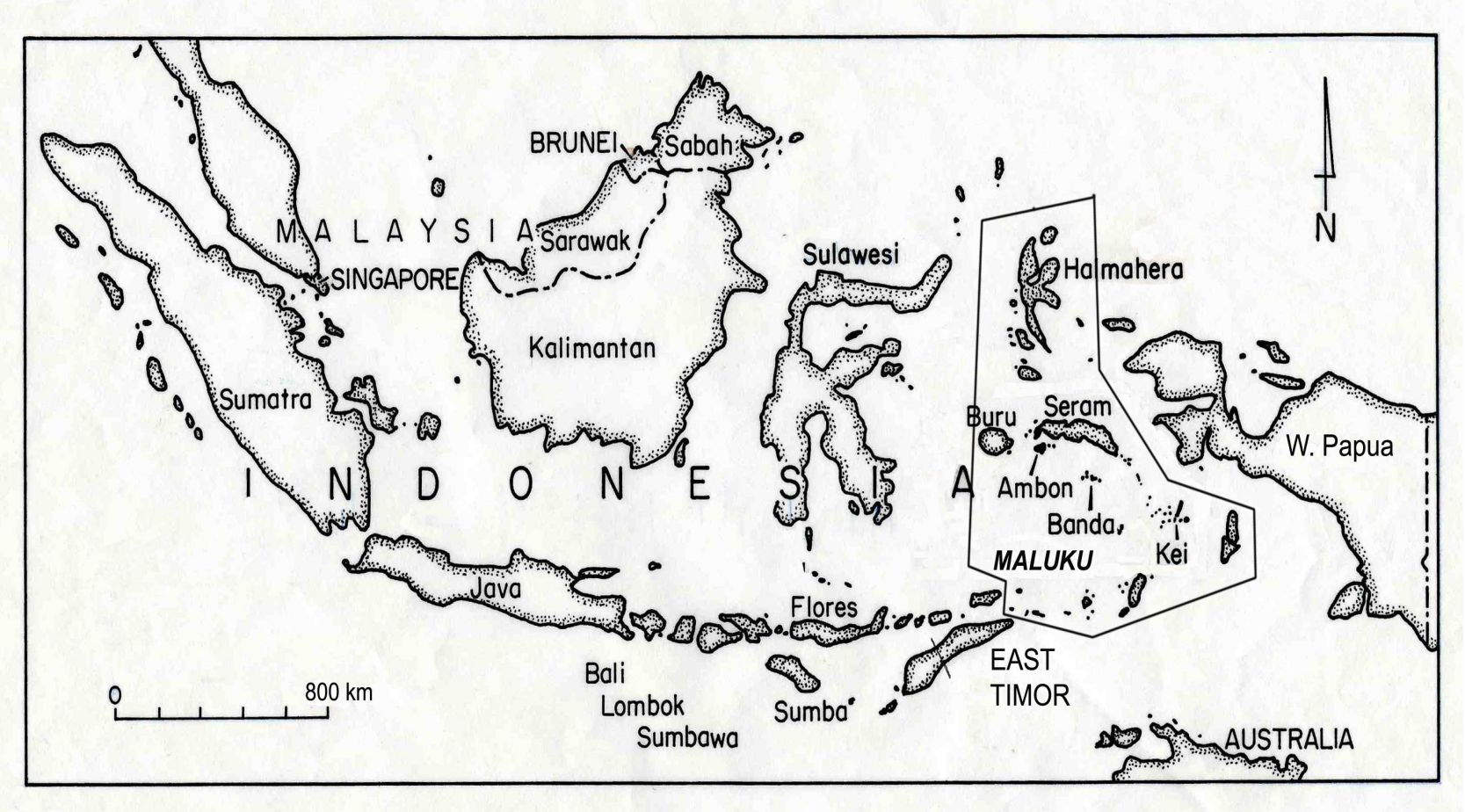
- Prompts may include:

Respondent asked to talk about some important past event in their life.
Respondent asked to engage in a discussion with the test administrator on a topic of interest.

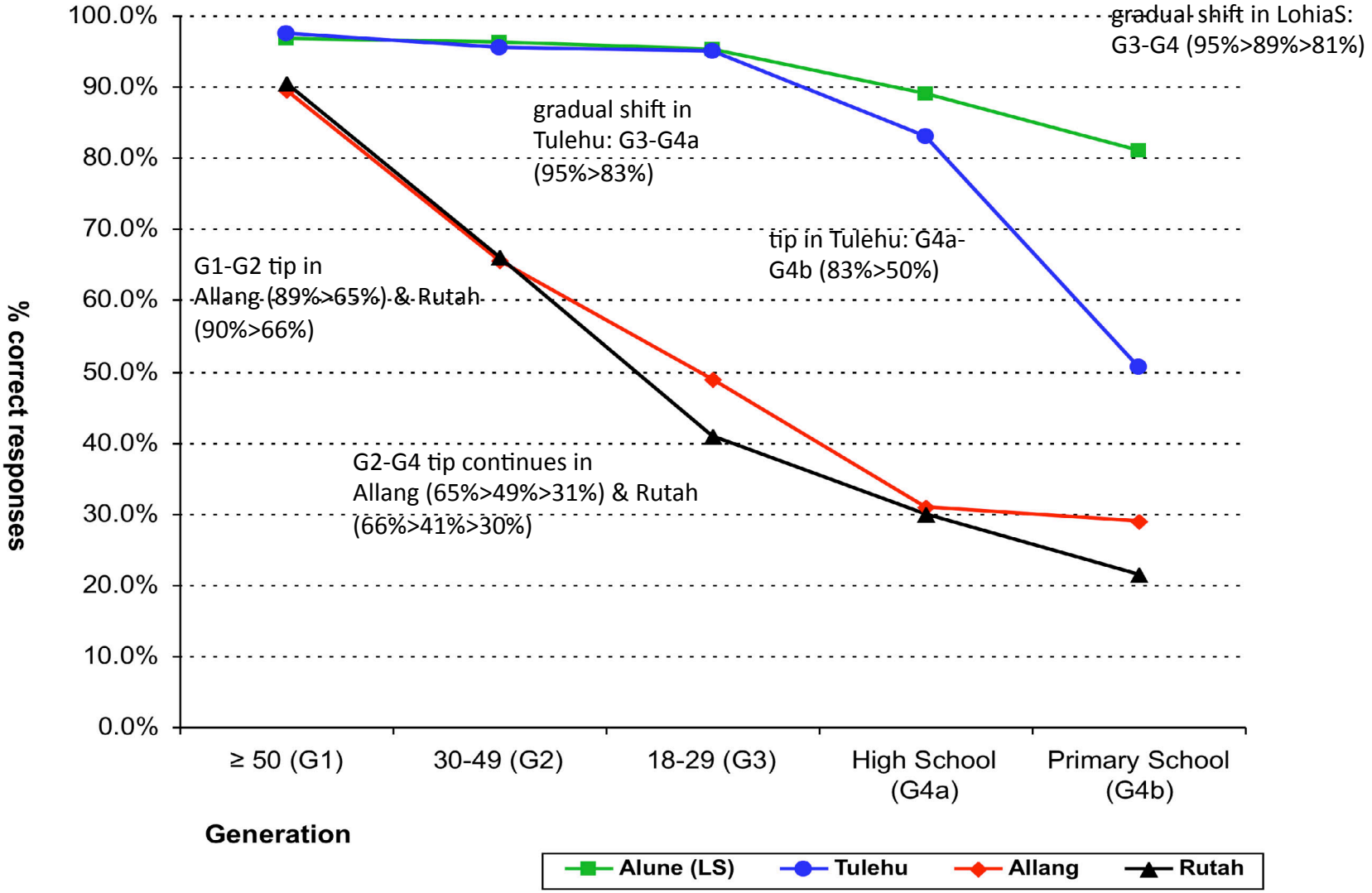
Task 3: Extended discourse

- Results are difficult to quantify
- Probably not so useful for statistical analysis
- Allows us to identify fluent and creative speakers

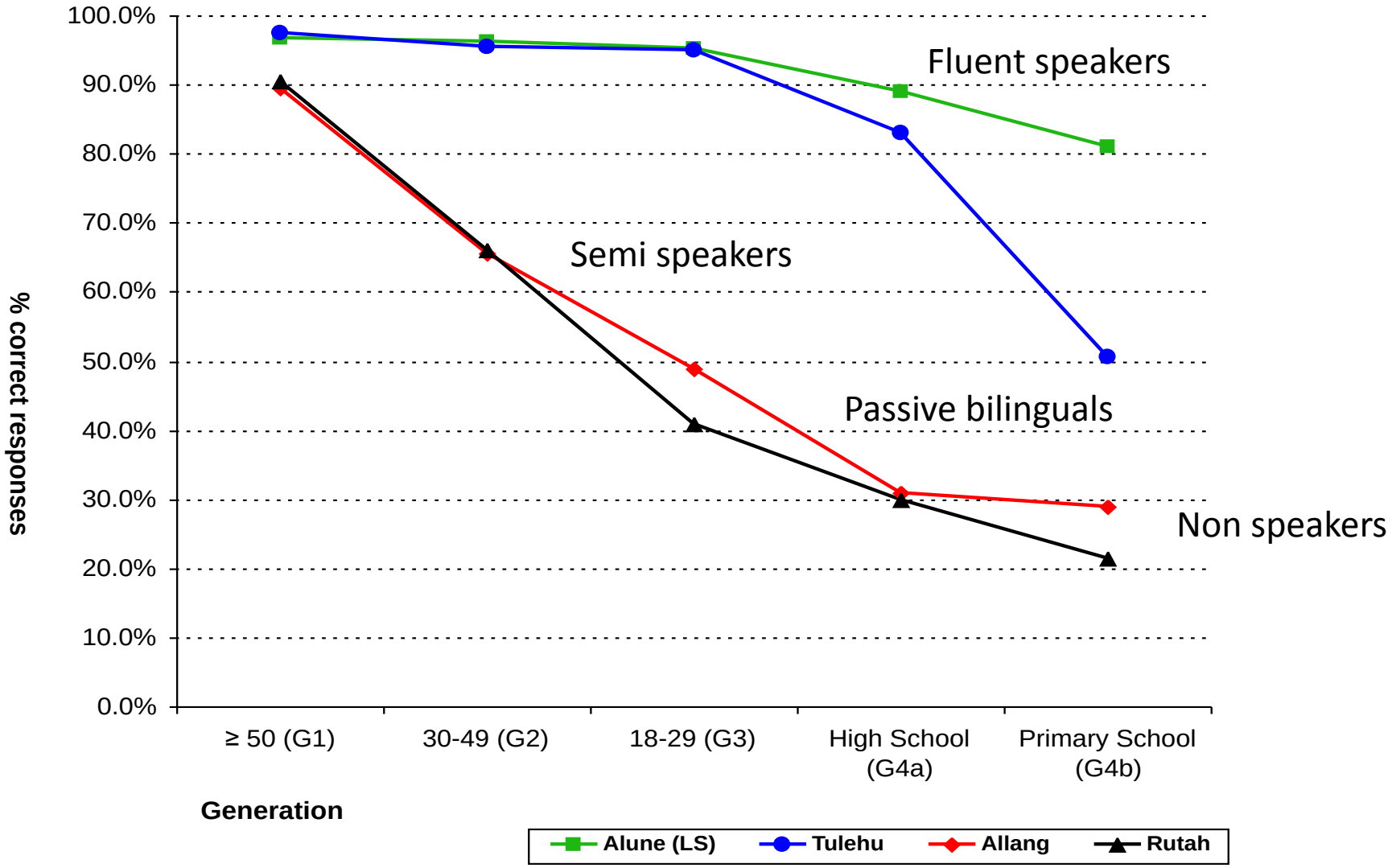
Maluku, eastern Indonesia



Lexical recognition results in 4 sites



4 speaker groups based on receptive ability



Sample translation task results

Sentence 3
"I didn't go" [negation]

Ambonese Malay elicitation sentence

Beta	seng	pigi
1s	NEG	go

KEY: village, gender, age

Alune target response

Au	*'eu*	*mo*	
1s	go	NEG	
Au	*'eu*	*mo*	[LT m13]
1s	go	NEG	
Au	pergi	*mo*	[LS f8]
1s	go.MAL	NEG	
Au	pigi	*mo*	[Mrtn m10]
1s	go.MAL	NEG	
Au	tidak	pigi	[LT m9]
1s	NEG.MAL	go.MAL	

recorded with fluent speakers

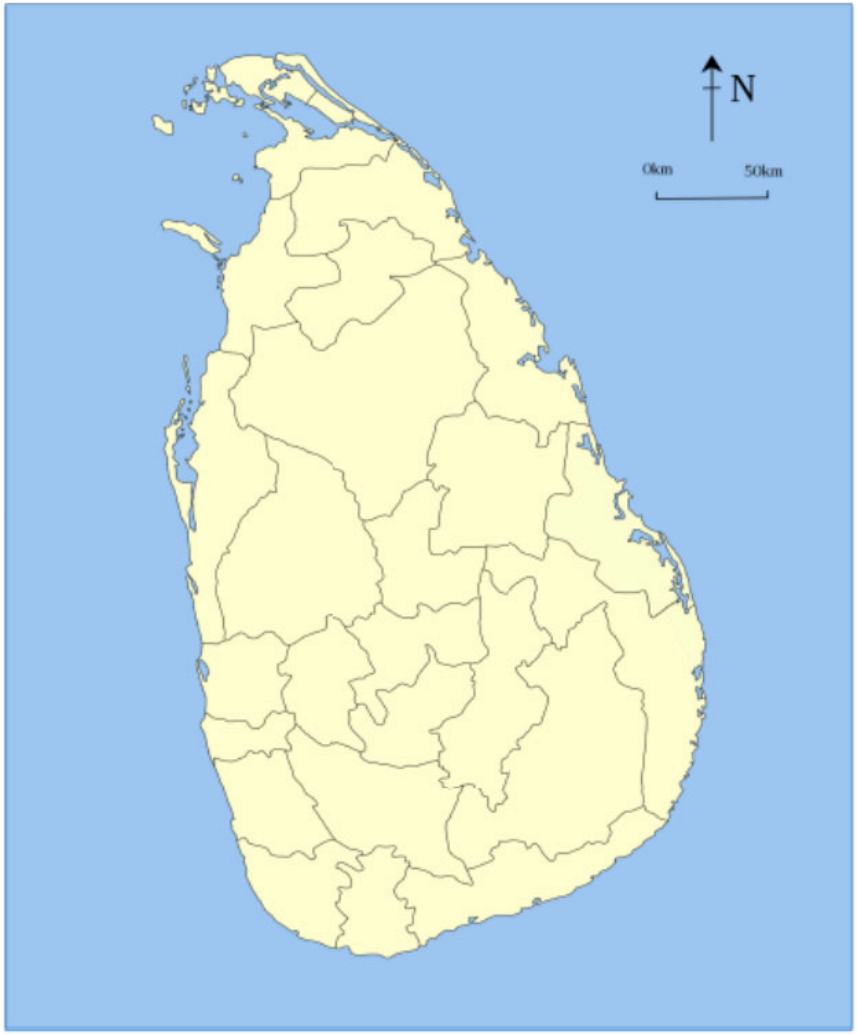
Speaker Group 1:
matches fluent speaker norm

Speaker Group 2:
Alune word order with Malay loan

Speaker Group 3:
Malay word order, Malay lexemes, Alune marked only with 1s pronoun

Sri Lankan Malay

Sri Lankan Malay



Sri Lankan Malay

Strong community, conservative language use, strong sense of Sri Lankan Malay identity tied to the language.

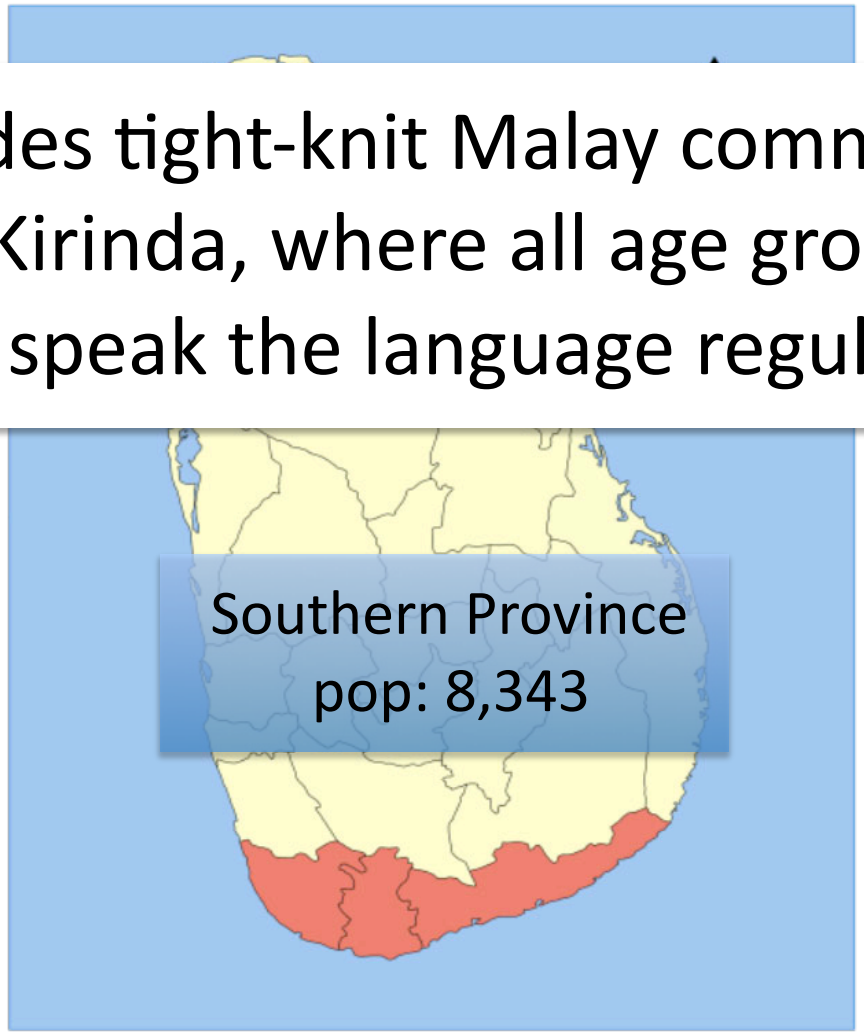
Sri Lankan Malay

Eastern Province
pop: 556

Small community, integrating with Tamil speaking Muslim community, low socio-economic status.

Sri Lankan Malay

Includes tight-knit Malay community of Kirinda, where all age groups still speak the language regularly.

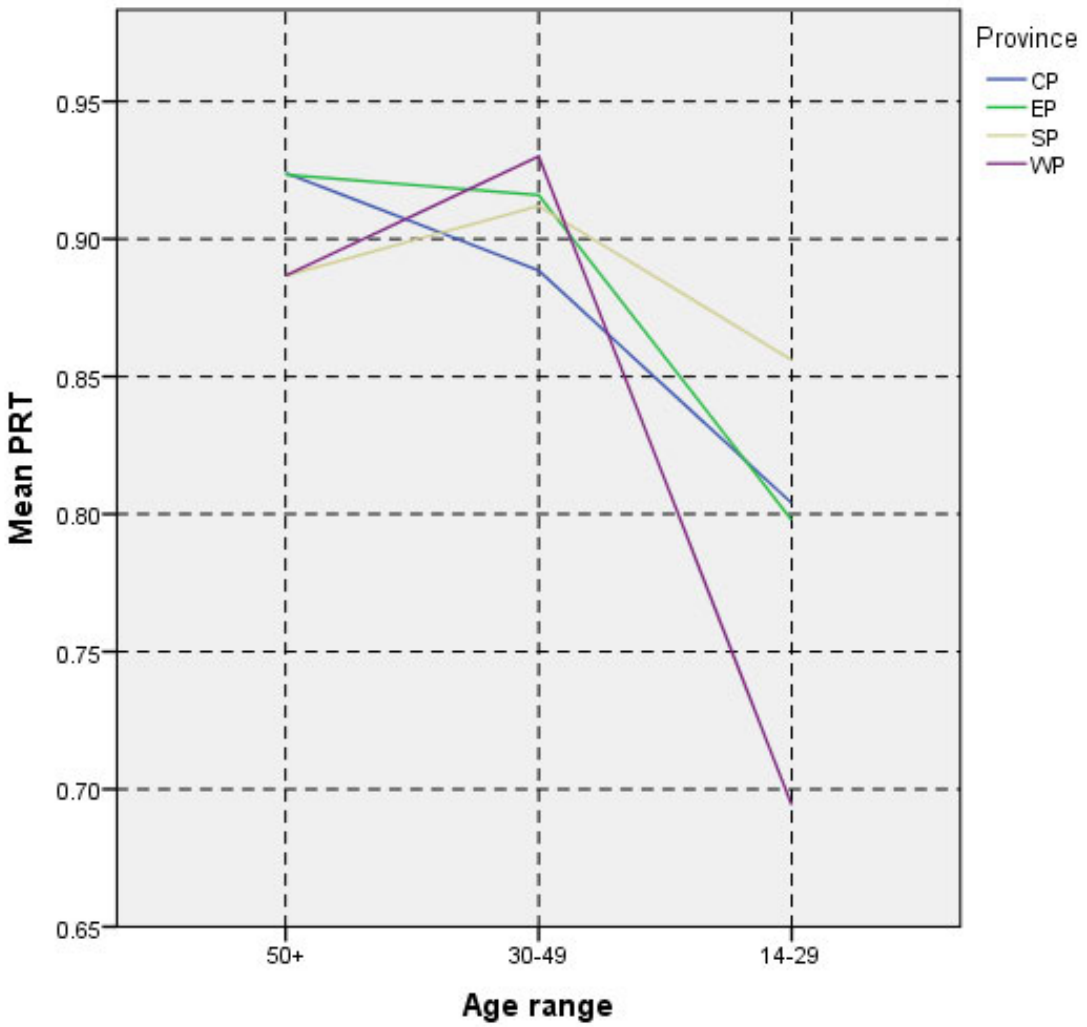


Sri Lankan Malay

Mixed population: Upper class elites speak English as their first language.
An historically tight-knit and linguistically conservative lower class community is now dispersing into the larger non-Malay population.

Western Province
pop: 24,718

Results of Task 1 show tip



Results of Task 2 are varied

- Three key features were analysed:
  - Vocabulary
  - Tense, aspect, modality marking
  - Case marking

Example responses

‘I went to the garden.’

See	*kubbong*	*na*	*yëng*	*pii*.
1s	garden	to	PAST	go

See	*luuwar*	*na*	*yëng*	*pii.*
1s	outside	to	PAST	go

Paraphrase strategy

Example responses

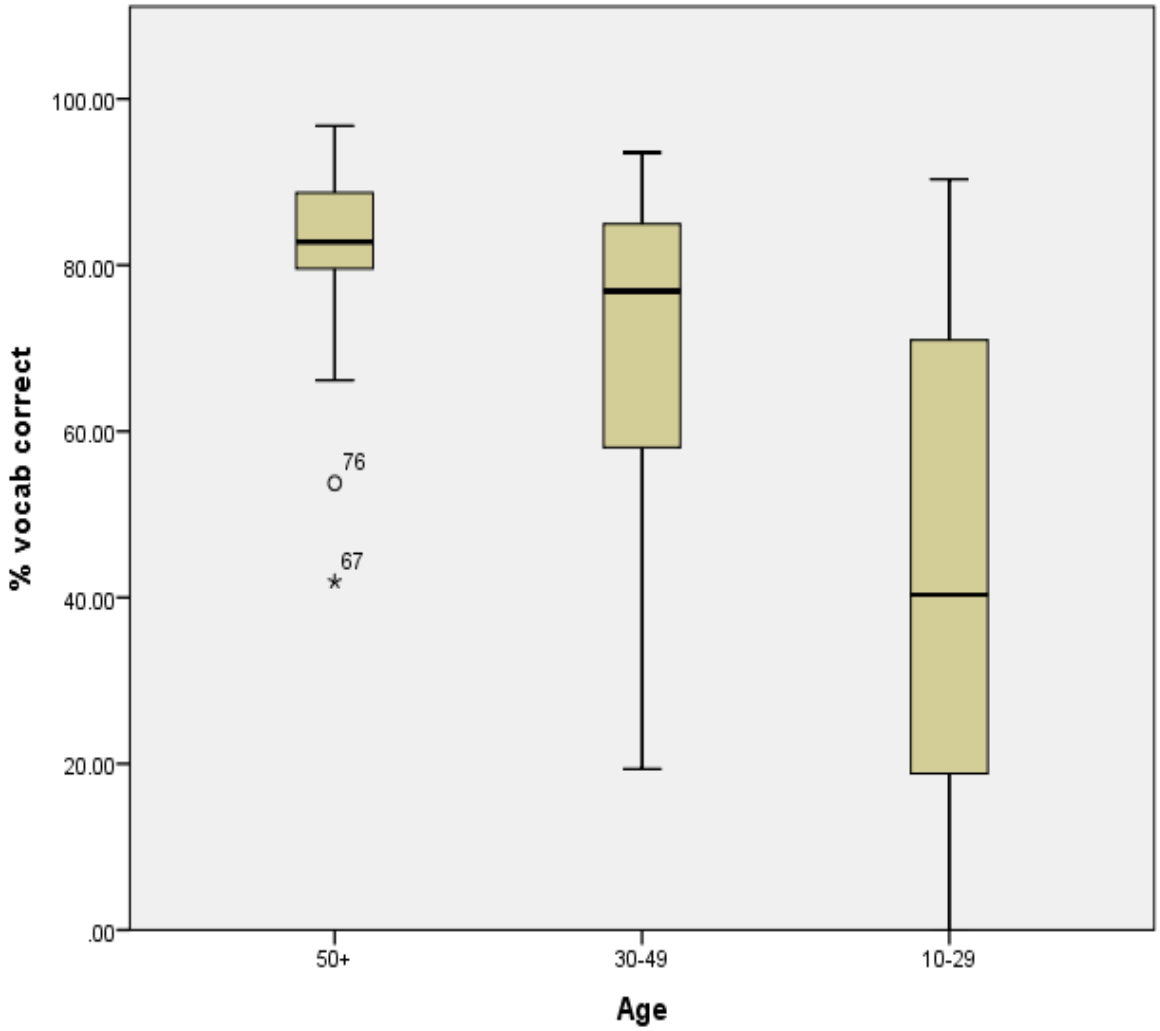
‘I went to the garden.’

See	*kubbong*	*na*	*yëng*	*pii.*
1s	garden	to	PAST	go

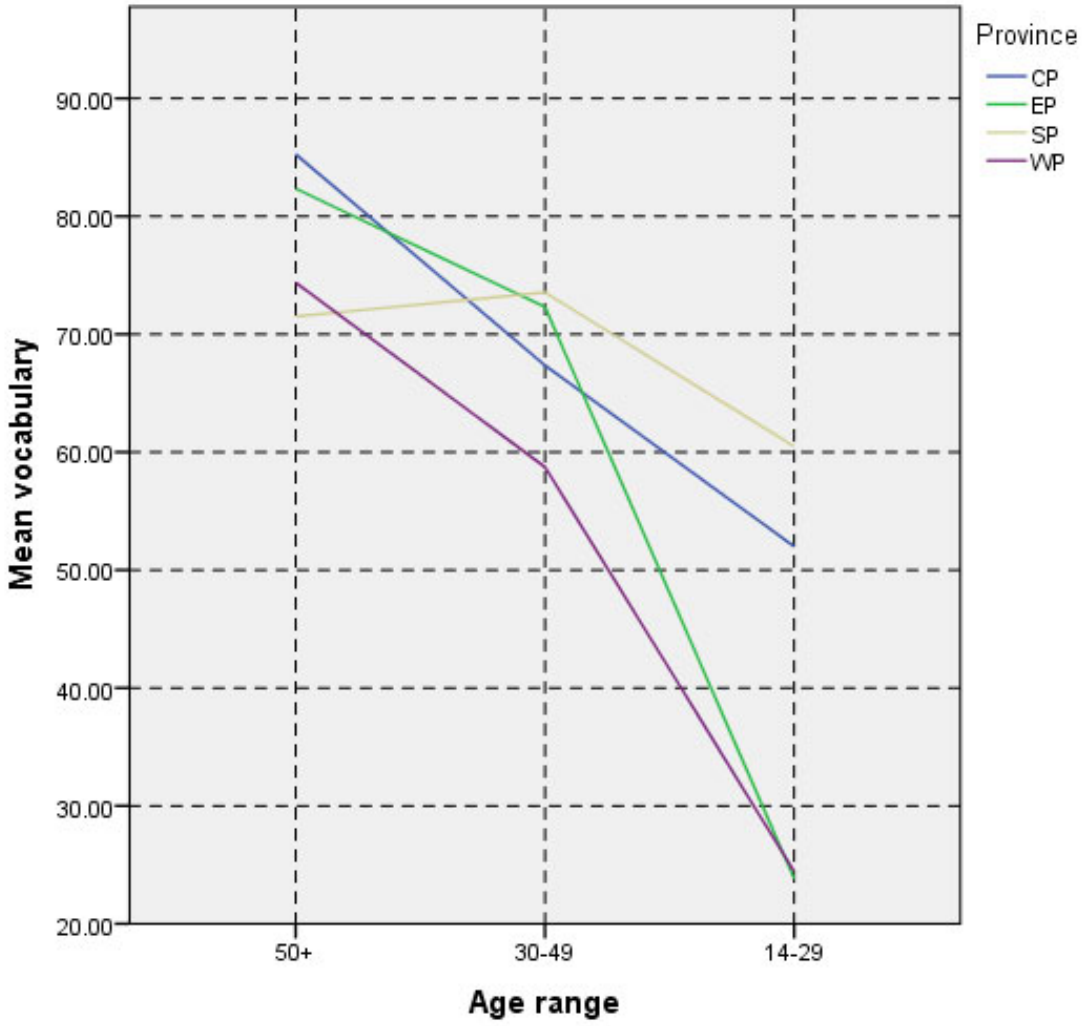
See	*garden*	*na*	*yëng*	*pii.*
1s	garden.ENG	to	PAST	go

Code-switching strategy

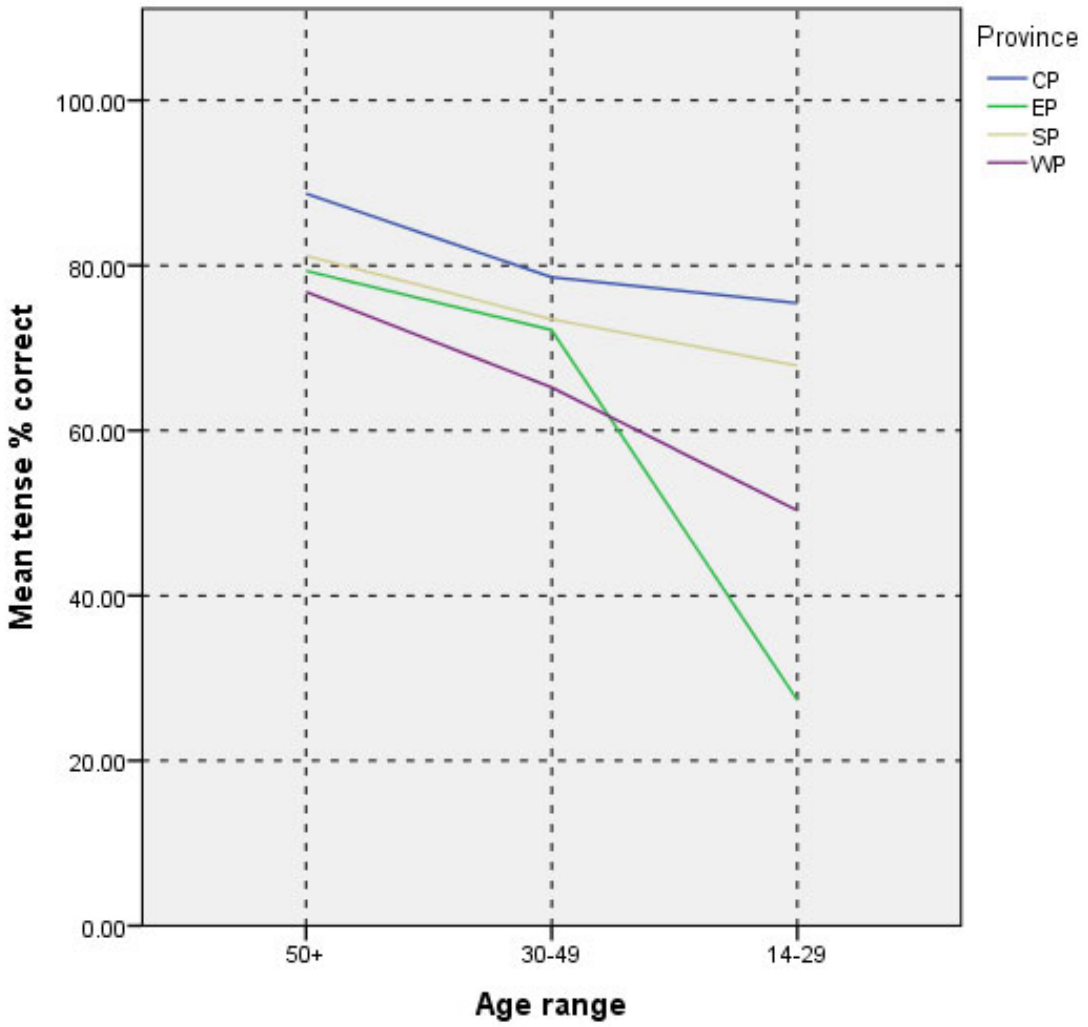
Vocabulary production by age



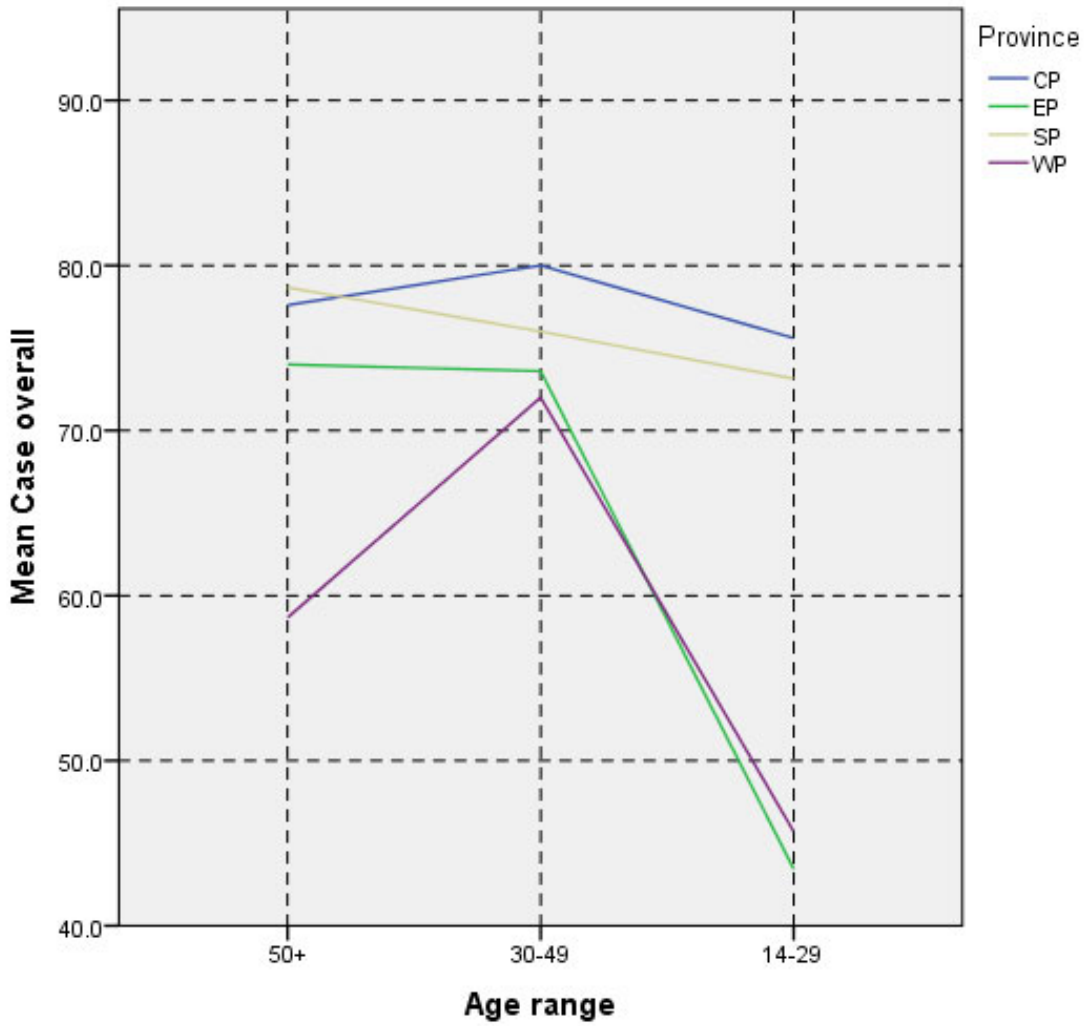
Vocabulary production by age and province



Tense, aspect and modality markers by age and province



Case marking by age and province



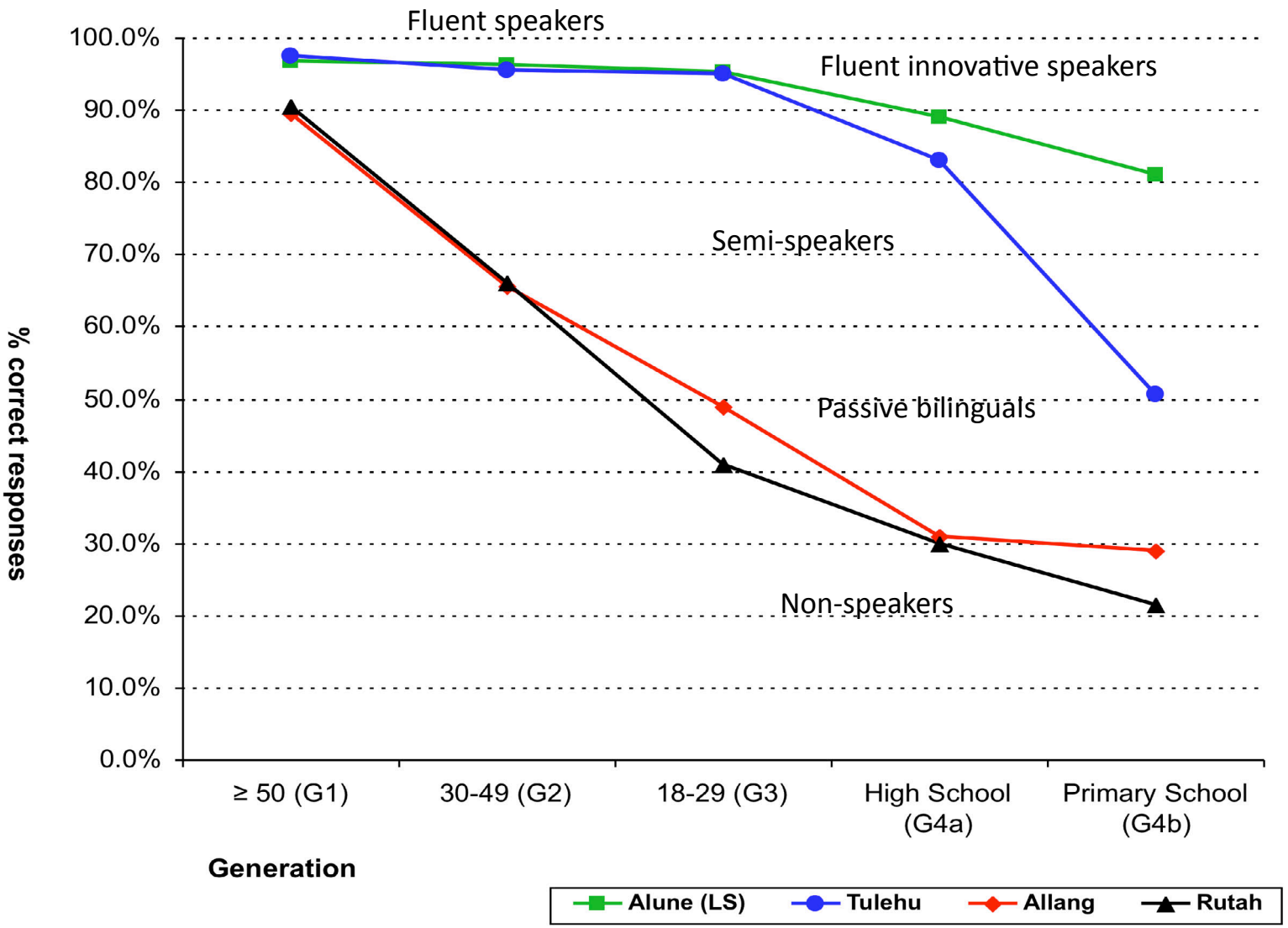
Usefulness of Task 2

- Use as a micro tool to identify areas for focusing language work
- A clearer image of complex patterns of variation across age groups and communities
- Results and possible applications will vary depending on the language and the particular community scenario

Combining receptive and productive ability

- Combining results from receptive (lexical recognition) and productive (translation) tasks allows the researcher to refine speaker/non-speaker groups based on:
  - productive knowledge of the lexicon
  - shared innovations (word order, grammatical features, use of loans)
- distinguishes primarily between higher scoring groups (≥ 80%) where strong receptive ability need not correlate with strong productive ability

5 speaker groups— receptive & productive ability



Methodological Applications

- Lexical recognition test can be used over a number of language communities
- Provides quick and useful overview of linguistic vitality
- Test protocol does not require linguistic training
- Test protocol can be run by community members, which can reduce stress of test taking

Practical Applications

- Raise awareness in the community and beyond of language vitality and language shift / loss
- Assess language maintenance needs
- Develop locally-appropriate language learning materials
- Identify language teachers and masters through creative use of the target language over a range of genres
- Highlight the urgency for documentation of these languages and need for training
- Strengthen arguments for funding

Materials

- Our photo sets and translation sentences are available at:

www.rnld.org/lvt

References

- Fishman, Joshua. 1991. *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*: 87-111. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Lewis, M. Paul and Gary F. Simons. 2010. Assessing endangerment: Expanding Fishman's GIDS. *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique 55(2):103–120.* Online URL: www.sil.org/~simonsg/preprint/EGIDS.pdf.
- McConvell, Patrick, and Nicholas Thieberger. 2001. *State of Indigenous languages in Australia - 2001, Australia state of the Environment Second Technical Paper Series No. 2 (Natural and Cultural Heritage)*. Canberra: Department of the Environment and Heritage.
- McConvell, Patrick. 2005. *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
- UNESCO, Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. 2003. *Language vitality and endangerment*: UNESCO, Paris.